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*The Last Poems
of Alice Meynell*

THE LAST POEMS OF
ALICE MEYNELL

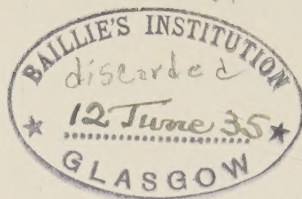
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THE POET AND HIS BOOK

Here are my thoughts, alive within this fold,
My simple sheep. Their shepherd, I grow wise
As dearly, gravely, deeply I behold
Their different eyes.

O distant pastures in their blood ! O streams
From watersheds that fed them for this prison !
Lights from aloft, midsummer suns in dreams,
Set and arisen.

They wander out, but all return anew,
The small ones, to this heart to which they
clung ;
“ And those that are with young,” the fruitful few
That are with young.

INTIMATIONS OF MORTALITY

FROM RECOLLECTIONS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

A simple child
That lightly draws its breath
And feels its life in every limb,
What should it know of death ?

Wordsworth

It knows but will not tell.

Awake, alone, it counts its father's years—
How few are left—its mother's. Ah, how well
It knows of death, in tears.

If any of the three—

Parents and child—believe they have
prevailed
To keep the secret of mortality,
I know that two have failed.

The third, the lonely, keeps

One secret—a child's knowledge. When
they come

At night to ask wherefore the sweet one weeps,

Those hidden lips are dumb.

THE WIND IS BLIND

“ EYELESS, IN GAZA, AT THE MILL, WITH SLAVES ”

Milton

The wind is blind.

The earth sees sun and moon ; the height
Is watch-tower to the dawn ; the plain
Shines to the summer ; visible light
Is scattered in the drops of rain.

The wind is blind.

The flashing billows are aware ;
With open eyes the cities see ;
Light leaves the ether, everywhere
Known to the homing bird and bee,

The wind is blind,

Is blind alone. How has he hurled
His ignorant lash, his aimless dart,
His eyeless rush upon the world,
Unseeing, to break his unknown heart !

The wind is blind,
And the sail traps him, and the mill
Captures him ; and he cannot save
His swiftness and his desperate will
From those blind uses of the slave.

TIME'S REVERSALS
A DAUGHTER'S PARADOX

To his devoted heart*

Who, young, had loved his ageing mate
for life,

In late lone years Time gave the elder's part,

Time gave the bridegroom's boast, Time
gave a younger wife.

A wilder prank and plot

Time soon will promise, threaten, offering me
Impossible things that Nature suffers not—

A daughter's riper mind, a child's seniority.

Oh, by my filial tears

Mourned all too young, Father! On this my head
Time yet will force at last the longer years,

Claiming some strange respect for me
from you, the dead.

* Dr. Johnson outlived by 30 years his wife, who was 20 years his senior.

Nay, nay ! Too new to know
Time's conjuring is, too great to understand.
Memory has not died ; it leaves me so—
Leaning a fading brow on your unfaded
hand.

THE THRESHING MACHINE

No "fan is in his hand" for these
Young villagers beneath the trees,
Watching the wheels. But I recall
The rhythm of rods that rise and fall,
Purging the harvest, over-seas.

No fan, no flail, no threshing-floor !
And all their symbols evermore
Forgone in England now—the sign,
The visible pledge, the threat divine,
The chaff dispersed, the wheat in store.

The unbreathing engine marks no tune,
Steady at sunrise, steady at noon,
Inhuman, perfect, saving time,
And saving measure, and saving rhyme—
And did our Ruskin speak too soon ?

“ No noble strength on earth ” he sees
“ Save Hercules’ arm ”; his grave decrees
Curse wheel and steam. As the wheels ran
I saw the other strength of man,
I knew the brain of Hercules.

WINTER TREES
ON THE HORIZON

O delicate ! Even in wooded lands
They show the margin of my world,
My own horizon ; little bands
Of twigs unveil that edge impearled.

And what is more mine own than this,
My limit, level with mine eyes ?
For me precisely do they kiss—
The rounded earth, the rounding skies.

It has my stature, that keen line
(Let mathematics vouch for it).
The lark's horizon is not mine,
No, nor his nestlings' where they sit ;

No, nor the child's. And, when I gain
The hills, I lift it as I rise
Erect ; anon, back to the plain
I soothe it with mine equal eyes.

TO SLEEP

Dear fool, be true to me !
I know the poets speak thee fair, and I
Hail thee uncivilly.
O, but I call with a more urgent cry !

I do not prize thee less,
I need thee more, that thou dost love to teach—
Father of foolishness—
The imbecile dreams clear out of wisdom's reach.

Come and release me ; bring
My irresponsible mind ; come in thy hours.
Draw from my soul the sting
Of wit that trembles, consciousness that cowers.

For if night comes without thee
She is more cruel than day. But thou, fulfil
Thy work, thy gifts about thee—
Liberty, liberty, from this weight of will.

My day-mind can endure
Upright, in hope, all it must undergo.
But O, afraid, unsure,
My night-mind waking lies too low, too low.

Dear fool, be true to me !
The night is thine, man yields it, it beseems
Thy ironic dignity.
Make me all night the innocent fool that dreams.

“THE MARRIAGE OF TRUE MINDS”

(IN THE BACH-GOUNOD “AVE MARIA”)

That seeking Prelude found its unforetold
 Ungessed intention, trend ;
Though needing no fulfilment, did enfold
 This exquisite end.

Bach led his notes up through their delicate slope
 Aspiring—so they sound,
And so they were—in some strange ignorant hope
 Thus to be crowned.

What deep soft seas beneath this buoyant barque !
 What winds to speed this bird !
What impulses to toss this heavenward lark !
 Thought—then the word.

Lovely the tune, lovely the unconsciousness
Of him who promised it.
Lovely the years that joined in blessedness
The two, the fit.

Bach was Precursor. But no Baptist's cry
Was his ; he, who began
For one who was to end, did prophesy,
By Nature's generous act, the lesser man.

IN HONOUR OF AMERICA (1917)

IN ANTITHESIS TO ROSSETTI'S "ON THE REFUSAL
OF AID BETWEEN NATIONS"

Not that the earth is changing, O my God !
Not that her brave democracies take heart
To share, to rule her treasure, to impart
The wine to those who long the wine-press trod ;
Not therefore trust we that beneath Thy nod,
Thy silent benediction, even now
In gratitude so many nations bow,
So many poor : not therefore, O my God !

But because living men for dying man
Go to a million deaths, to deal one blow ;
And justice speaks one great compassionate
tongue ;
And nation unto nation calls " One clan
We succourers are, one tribe ! " By this we
know
Our earth holds confident, steadfast, being
young.

“LORD, I OWE THEE A DEATH”

Richard Hooker

(IN TIME OF WAR)

Man pays that debt with new munificence,
Not piecemeal now, not slowly, by the old :
Not grudgingly, by the effaced thin pence,
But greatly and in gold.

REFLEXIONS

(I) IN IRELAND, 1920

A mirror faced a mirror : ire and hate
Opposite ire and hate ; the multiplied,
The complex charge rejected, intricate,
From side to sullen side ;

One plot, one crime, one treachery, nay, one name,
Assumed, denounced, in echoes of replies.
The doubt, exchanged, lit thousands of one flame
Within those mutual eyes.

REFLEXIONS

(II) IN "OTHELLO"

A mirror faced a mirror : in sweet pain
His dangers with her pity did she track,
Received her pity with his love again,
And these she wafted back.

That masculine passion in her little breast
She bandied with him ; her compassion he
Bandied with her. What tender sport ! No rest
Had love's infinity.

REFLEXIONS

(III) IN TWO POETS

A mirror faced a mirror : O, thy word,
Thou lord of images, did lodge in me,
Locked to my heart, homing from home, a bird,
A carrier, bound for thee.

Thy migratory greatness, greater far
For that return, returns ; now grow divine
By endlessness my visiting thoughts, that are
Those visiting thoughts of thine.

TO CONSCRIPTS

“COMPEL THEM TO COME IN”

St. Luke's Gospel

You “ made a virtue of necessity ”

By divine sanction ; you, the loth, the grey,
The random, gentle, unconvinced ; O, be
The crowned !—you may, you may.

You, the compelled, be feasted! You, the caught,
Be freemen of the gates that word unlocks !
Accept your victory from that unsought,
That heavenly paradox.

THE VOICE OF A BIRD

“ HE SHALL RISE UP AT THE VOICE OF A BIRD ”

Ecclesiastes

Who then is “ he ” ?

Dante, Keats, Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley ; all
Rose in their greatness at the shrill decree,
The little rousing inarticulate call.

For they stood up
At the bird-voice, of lark, of nightingale,
Drank poems from that throat as from a cup.
Over the great world's notes did these prevail.

And not alone
The signal poets woke. In listening man,
Woman, and child a poet stirs unknown,
Throughout the Mays of birds since Mays began.

He rose, he heard—
Our father, our St. Peter, in his tears—
The crowing, twice, of the prophetic bird,
The saddest cock-crow of our human years.

THE LAWS OF VERSE

Dear laws, come to my breast !
Take all my frame, and make your close arms meet
Around me ; and so ruled, so warmed, so pressed,
I breathe, aware ; I feel my wild heart beat.

Dear laws, be wings to me !
The feather merely floats. O, be it heard
Through weight of life—the skylark's gravity—
That I am not a feather, but a bird.

THE QUESTION

IL POETA MI DISSE, " CHE PENSI ? "

Virgil stayed Dante with a wayside word ;
But long, and low, and loud and urgently
The poets of my passion have I heard
 Summoning me.

It is their closest whisper and their call.
Their greatness to this lowliness hath spoken,
Their voices rest upon that interval,
 Their sign, their token.

Man at his little prayer tells Heaven his thought,
To man entrusts his thought—" Friend, this is
 mine."

The immortal poets within my breast have sought,
 Saying, " What is thine ? "

“THE RETURN TO NATURE”

Histories of Modern Poetry

(I) PROMETHEUS

It was the south : mid-everything,
Mid-land, mid-summer, noon.
And deep within a limpid spring
The mirrored sun of June.

• Splendour in freshness ! Ah, who stole
This sun, this fire, from heaven ?
He holds it shining in his soul,
Prometheus the forgiven.

(II) T H E T I S

In her bright title poets dare

What the wild eye of fancy sees—

Similitude—the clear, the fair

Light mystery of images.

Round the blue sea I love the best

The argent foam played, slender, fleet ;

I saw—past Wordsworth and the rest—

Her natural, Greek, and silver feet.

TO SILENCE

“SPACE, THE BOUND OF A SOLID”: SILENCE,
THEN, THE FORM OF A MELODY

Not, Silence, for thine idleness I raise
My silence-bounded singing in thy praise,
But for thy moulding of my Mozart's tune,
Thy hold upon the bird that sings the moon,
Thy magisterial ways.

Man's lovely definite melody-shapes are thine,
Outlined, controlled, compressed, complete,
divine.

Also thy fine intrusions do I trace,
Thy afterthoughts, thy wandering, thy grace,
Within the poet's line.

Thy secret is the song that is to be.
Music had never stature but for thee,
Sculptor ! strong as the sculptor Space whose
 hand
Urged the Discobolus and bade him stand.

* * * * *

Man, on his way to Silence, stops to hear and
 see.

THE ENGLISH METRES

The rooted liberty of flowers in breeze
Is theirs, by national luck impulsive, terse,
Tethered, uncaptured, rules obeyed "at ease,"
Time-strengthened laws of verse.

Or they are like our seasons that admit
Inflexion, not infraction : Autumn hoar,
Winter more tender than our thoughts of it,
But a year's steadfast four ;

Redundant syllables of Summer rain,
And displaced accents of authentic Spring ;
Spondiac clouds above a gusty plain
With dactyls on the wing.

Not Common Law, but Equity, is theirs—
Our metres ; play and agile foot askance,
And distant, beckoning, blithely rhyming pairs,
Unknown to classic France ;

Unknown to Italy. Ay, count, collate,
 Latins ! with eye foreseeing on the time,
And numbered fingers, and approaching fate
 On the appropriate rhyme.

Nay, nobly our grave measures are decreed :
 Heroic, Alexandrine with the stay,
Deliberate ; or else like him whose speed
 Did outrun Peter, urgent in the break of day.

“ RIVERS UNKNOWN TO SONG ”

James Thomson

Wide waters in the waste ; or, out of reach,
Rough Alpine falls where late a glacier hung ;
Or rivers groping for the alien beach,
Through continents, unsung.

Nay, not these nameless, these remote, alone ;
But all the streams from all the watersheds—
Peneus, Danube, Nile—are the unknown,
Young in their ancient beds.

Man has no tale for them. O travellers swift
From secrets to oblivion ! Waters wild
That pass in act to bend a flower or lift
The bright limbs of a child !

For they are new, they are fresh ; there's no surprise

Like theirs on earth. O strange for evermore !
This moment's Tiber with his shining eyes
Never saw Rome before.

Man has no word for their eternity—

Rhine, Avon, Arno, younglings, youth uncrowned :

Ignorant, innocent, instantaneous, free,
Unwelcomed, unrenowned.

TO THE MOTHER OF
CHRIST THE SON OF MAN

We too (one cried), we too,
We the unready, the perplexed, the cold,
Must shape the Eternal in our thoughts anew,
Cherish, possess, enfold.

Thou sweetly, we in strife.
It is our passion to conceive Him thus
In mind, in sense, within our house of life ;
That seed is locked in us.

We must affirm our Son
From the ambiguous Nature's difficult speech,
Gather in darkness that resplendent One,
Close as our grasp can reach.

Nor shall we ever rest
From this our task. An hour sufficed for thee,
Thou innocent ! He lingers in the breast
Of our humanity.

A COMPARISON IN A
SEASIDE FIELD

'Tis royal and authentic June
Over this poor soil blossoming ;
Here lies, beneath an upright noon,
Thin nation for so wild a king.

Far off, the noble Summer rules,
Violent in the ardent rose,
His sun alight in mirroring pools,
Braggart on Alps of vanquished snows ;

Away, aloft, true to his hour,
Announced, his colour, his fire, his jest.
But here, in negligible flower,
Summer is not proclaimed :—confessed.

A woman I marked ; for her no state,
Small joy, no song. She had her boon,
Her only youth, true to its date,
Faintly perceptible, her June.

SURMISE

THE TRACK OF A HUMAN MOOD

Not wish, nor fear, nor quite expectancy
Is that vague spirit Surmise,
That wanderer, that wonderer whom we see
Within each other's eyes ;

And yet not often. For she flits away,
Fitful as infant thought,
Visitant at a venture, hope at play,
Unversed in facts, untaught.

In " the wide fields of possibility "
Surmise, conjecturing,
Makes little trials, incredulous, that flee
Abroad on random wing.

One day this inarticulate shall find speech,

This hoverer seize our breath.

Surmise shall close with man—with all, with
each—

In her own sovereign hour, the moments of our
death.

TO ANTIQUITY

“ . . . REVERENCE FOR OUR FATHERS, WITH THEIR
STORES OF EXPERIENCES ”

An author whose name I did not note

O our young ancestor,
Our boy in Letters, how we trudge oppressed
With our “ experiences,” and you of yore
Flew light, and blessed !

Youngling, in your new town,
Tight, like a box of toys—the town that is
Our shattered, open ruin, with its crown
Of histories ;

You with your morning words
Fresh from the night, your yet un-sonneted
moon,
Your passion undismayed, cool as a bird’s
Ignorant tune ;

O youngling ! how is this ?

Your poems are not wearied yet, not dead.

Must I bow low ? or, with an envious kiss,

Put you to bed ?

CHRISTMAS NIGHT

“IF I CANNOT SEE THEE PRESENT I WILL MOURN
THEE ABSENT, FOR THIS ALSO IS A PROOF OF LOVE”

Thomas à Kempis

We do not find Him on the difficult earth,
In surging human-kind,
In wayside death or accidental birth,
Or in the “march of mind.”

Nature, her nests, her prey, the fed, the caught,
Hide Him so well, so well,
His steadfast secret there seems to our thought
Life’s saddest miracle.

He’s but conjectured in man’s happiness,
Suspected in man’s tears,
Or lurks beyond the long, discouraged guess,
Grown fainter through the years.

* * *

But absent, absent now ? Ah, what is this,
Near as in child-birth bed,
Laid on our sorrowful hearts, close to a kiss ?
A homeless childish head.

THE OCTOBER REDBREAST

Autumn is weary, halt, and old;
Ah, but she owns the song of joy !
Her colours fade, her woods are cold.
Her singing-bird's a boy, a boy.

In lovely Spring the birds were bent
On nests, on use, on love forsooth !
Grown-up were they. 'This boy's content,
For his is liberty, his is youth.

The musical stripling sings for play
Taking no thought, and virgin-glad.
For duty sang those mates in May.
This singing-bird's a lad, a lad.

TO "A CERTAIN RICH MAN"

"I HAVE FIVE BRETHREN. . . FATHER, I BESEECH
THEE . . . LEST THEY COME TO THIS PLACE"

St. Luke's Gospel

Thou wouldst not part thy spoil
Gained from the beggar's want, the weakling's toil,
Nor spare a jot of sumptuousness or state
For Lazarus at the gate.

And in the appalling night
Of expiation, as in day's delight,
Thou heldst thy niggard hand ; it would not share
One hour of thy despair.

Those five—thy prayer for them !
O generous ! who, condemned, wouldst not con-
demn,
Whose ultimate human greatness proved thee so
A miser of thy woe.

“ EVERLASTING FAREWELLS ! AND AGAIN, AND
YET AGAIN . . . EVERLASTING FAREWELLS ! ”

De Quincey

“ Farewells ! ” O, what a word !
Denying this agony, denying the affrights,
Denying all De Quincey spoke or heard
In the infernal sadness of his nights.

How mend these strange “ farewells ” ?
“ Vale ” ? “ Addio ” ? “ Leb’wohl ” ? Not
one but seems
A tranquil refutation ; tolling bells
That yet withhold the terror of his dreams.

THE POET TO THE BIRDS

You bid me hold my peace,

Or so I think, you birds ; you'll not forgive
My kill-joy song that makes the wild song cease,
Silent or fugitive.

Yon thrush stopt in mid-phrase

At my mere footfall ; and a longer note
Took wing and fled afield, and went its ways
Within the blackbird's throat.

Hereditary song,

Illyrian lark and Paduan nightingale,
Is yours, unchangeable the ages long ;
Assyria heard your tale ;

Therefore you do not die.

But single, local, lonely, mortal, new,
Unlike, and thus like all my race, am I,
Preluding my adieu.

My human song must be

My human thought. Be patient till 'tis done.
I shall not hold my little peace ; for me
There is no peace but one.

THE POEMS OF ALICE MEYNELL

COMPLETE EDITION IN ONE VOLUME, 1923

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The footfalls of her muse waken not sounds, but silences. We lift a feather from the marsh and say: "This way went a heron." . . . It is poetry, the spiritual voice of which will become audible when the "high noises" of to-day have followed the feet that made them.—FRANCIS THOMPSON.

• • •

With an exquisite singleness of genius she stands apart, and escapes the categories. The more you live with these pages the more will you be persuaded that they contain in unusual proportion the stuff of immortality.—J. L. GARVIN.

She was the saint of our poetry. Therefore, she has no counterpart among English poets. . . . She etherealised love and spiritualised passion and humanised theology.—JAMES DOUGLAS.

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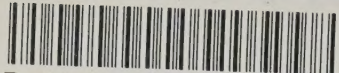
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